HARMONISATION OF PATHOLOGY TRAINING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Founded in 1958, the European Union of Medical Specialists (UEMS) is one of the oldest political organisations representing medicine at both postgraduate training and practising levels. The UEMS represents the various national associations of medical specialists from the member countries and some few other European countries like Norway and Switzerland. An executive and management council is responsible for, and work through 36 specialist sections, each with their own European Board. The objectives of UEMS include the promotion of quality of patient care through the harmonisation and improvement of postgraduate specialist training and on continuing medical education. The UEMS Sections have produced charters on specialist training, visitations of training programs and continuing medical education. Mor detailed information can be found on the UEMS web site: http://www.uems.be/

Initially, Pathology was considered a Subsection of Laboratory Medicine. In 1988 anatomic pathologists created their own section of Anatomic Pathology and Cytopathology, four years later renamed as the Section of Pathology/ European Board of Pathology. The Section/Board has worked to facilitate harmonisation of pathology training, including length of the training, number and type of pathology procedures needed for certification, minimal requirements for accreditation of training institutions, directors of training programs and trainees. The work has also resulted in a European Examination in Pathology. In 2001, a revised charter on pathology training was produced and is now officially accepted, see the web site of the UEMS Section of Pathology/ European Board of Pathology: http://www.europathol.org/.

The aim of this article is to highlight the major items of the revised Charter, present the current status of Pathology training in the European Union based on a recent survey among delegates of the Section/Board, address some important challenges in the current situation for pathology in Europe, comment on aspects of subspecialisation still under discussion in the Section/Board of Pathology and finally look ahead.

European Charter on Pathology Training

The Pathology charter of 2001 contains the following items:

- Information about the central monitoring authority for Pathology at EU level
- General aspects of training in Pathology
- Requirements for training institutions, teachers and trainees
- A motion with further specifications of requested qualifications and performances
The duration of training for Pathology remains a minimum of five years. Every national training program should include a common trunk of histopathology, cytopathology and autopsy pathology. As specified in the motion, it should include as a minimum the following procedures:

8000 pathological examinations (all documented) encompassing a minimum of:

a) 4500 histopathological examinations with various types of specimens from various organs,

b) 2500 cytological examinations
   i. minimum 1500 gynaecological
   ii. 500 non-gynaecological
   iii. at least 100 specimens must be screened by the trainee,

c) 1000 examinations according to special interest of the trainee, and

100 autopsies, including gross, microscopy, clinicopathologic correlation of both adult and paediatric cases.

If the requirements for training programs cannot be fulfilled in one institution, a rotation through other training programs should be facilitated. The head of training/tutor should have at least 5 years experience after qualification and a customized training programme should be worked out for each trainee. The ratio between the qualified specialists in the teaching staff and the number of trainees must guarantee a close personal monitoring of the trainee during his/her training as well as providing an adequate exposure of the trainee to the training activities. Each trainee should keep a personal inventory of performance. The trainee must additionally have sufficient linguistic ability to study the international literature and communicate with foreign colleagues.

In order to investigate whether the EU training charter on Pathology is actually fulfilled by the member states, we recently have performed a survey using a questionnaire. We asked for relevant information like the number of residents in the national training program, the number of pathologists involved as tutors, the number of training institutions, the duration of training, the existence of obligatory teaching courses or examinations, and rules related to site visits. The current strong and weak points were surveyed as well as specific wishes regarding qualitative or quantitative improvements. In addition, an estimation was requested on the training capacity needed in the future.

The challenges in the current situation

Based on the data obtained so far we have documented that great differences in training requirements among the member states still exist. The differences mainly relate to the duration of training (varying from 3 to 5 years), the number of pathological examinations (with marked variation in the number of cytological examinations and autopsies, least variation in the number of histopathological examinations), and the existence or not of regular obligatory courses, examinations and site visits.

Another major issue documented by the questionnaire is the current and future shortage of pathologists encountered in many countries. This will require a still further expansion of the training capacity.

The challenges to Pathology also lies in the rapid developments in bio-informatics, molecular high-throughput technology, computerized imaging with increasing resolution and transgenic animal models. Undoubtedly these developments will have major impact on Pathology and even reshape parts
of the discipline. The challenge is to attract young clever colleagues to choose pathology as their speciality

Subspecialisation in pathology

The UEMS Section of Pathology/European Board of Pathology represents all areas of Pathology and does not include separate subsections for subspecialties. Nevertheless, some areas have individual representatives, i.e. cytopathology, forensic pathology and neuropathology, for historical reasons. In a broad discipline like pathology, there will always be an urge towards subspecialisation. The tradition and formalities around subspecialisation vary greatly throughout Europe. The subspecialisation can be modality oriented or organ oriented. Modality subspecialisation are exemplified by cytopathology, molecular pathology, paediatric pathology and autopsy pathology. Examples of organ pathology are neuropathology, haematopathology, gynaecopathology and dermatopathology. The issue of subspecialisation has been repeatedly discussed in the European Board of Pathology as questions related to this is a practical problem in some member states.

In some EU member states a particular area of Pathology is performed by clinicians, e.g. dermatopathology and neuropathology in German speaking countries. Other EU member states have a mixed situation with participation of both clinicians and pathologist in a subspecialty, e.g. dermatopathology in the U.K. In addition, experience with dermatopathology in some countries had created a monopolisation position for dermatologists, leading to atrophy of this subspeciality in the corresponding pathology practice. This variable and sometimes unclear situation was the rationale for the UEMS Section of Pathology/European Board of Pathology to embark on an open discussion with its representatives, and simultaneously with the UEMS Section of Dermatology/European Board of Dermatology, on harmonisation of subspecialisation with emphasis on dermatopathology. The idea was to see if an agreement of a bi-specialty charter on dermatopathology could be reached. A mixed subcommittee consisting of representatives derived from both Sections/Boards prepared the discussion on the 2001 meeting in the European Board of Pathology.

A proposal for a bi-specialty charter was rejected by the UEMS Section of Pathology/European Board of Pathology based on general principles and the following considerations:

a) all areas in Pathology should only be practised by pathologists;

b) no extra formal recognition should be needed for pathologists performing a Pathology subspecialty/area if special competence;

c) dermatopathology should be considered as every other subspecialty/area of special competence in Pathology.

The way ahead:

Harmonisation and collaboration in the specialisation in Pathology in Europe

The great gap between the charter training requirements and the training requirements in several member states represents a problem for the free movement of pathologists throughout Europe. How can we improve the progress in this harmonisation? Several possible scenarios can be envisaged:

a) focus on specific shortcomings in the current status based on the recently held survey
b) through UEMS European Board of Pathology impose direct action towards the national bodies in charge of the national training requirements

c) execute a pro-active policy of propagation of optimal requirements for training by exchanging promising residents among institutions in the member states

d) active support of training programs in countries where the UEMS minimal requirements are difficult to meet; this may be the case of those countries applying for joining the EU

e) create a platform for professional and scientific exchange in collaboration with the European Society of Pathology.

It seems wise to follow all these options.

The initiative should be ours, hereby creating a vehicle for future academic careers in Pathology, the key to the further development of our discipline.

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References
